

# The Devil's Playground

Fiction • Ben Gamble

Shaking hands held the list of rules. My sweat blurred the ink. I took deep breaths. In a way, the noise and chaos were calming. The screams from the ball pit and the kids yelling at the ticket dispensers were like an *Om*, repeating endlessly on the path to nirvana.

"You must be Greg!" my guest said, clapping me on the back from behind. I nearly pissed myself. *Deep breaths.*

"Um, yes, y-yes sir." I placed the list of rules in my lap and glanced down at them. *Number one: avoid showing fear.* "Yes, yes sir. I'm Greg," I said. I forced confidence into my voice as the kids two tables over forced pizza down their throats.

The man sat down across from me, his tuxedo absolutely immaculate. Dark silk seemed to flow across his skin, his tie perfectly tied, his hair slicked back, every single strand lying flat in perfect obedience. I couldn't place his age—he had the beginnings of crow's feet, and just enough salt-and-pepper to make you want to trust him. He couldn't have been past forty.

"Well," he chuckled, flashing his pearly whites. "I gotta say, this is a first. I like that. I like innovation."

I glanced down at the rules. *Number three: be on your guard against flattery—*

The man drew a cigarette from inside his jacket and placed it in his mouth, taking a pull without lighting it.

"Ah, that's good. Want one?"

*...and be on your guard against gifts.*

"No, thank you," I said. In my head the words sounded neutral, but my tongue fumbled them. They came out too quickly, as sweaty and shaky as my

hands were. He noticed and gave me a little wink. He leaned back against the side of the booth, absentmindedly brushing some leftover pizza crumbs off the table and putting his feet up. He watched the children scampering around, trying vainly to play the monster blaster game which they did not have the coins for. Another child had somehow become stuck in the basketball hoop, which had not stopped his fellow players from still trying to shoot basketballs through the same hoop.

“Gotta love kids, don’t you?” he said. We were quiet for a moment. I dug my hands into my thighs and tried to remember the cold feeling of the rosary around my neck.

“What am I thinking?” the man said, sitting upright. “Where are my manners?” He reached a hand out to shake. Mine was slow to meet his. The man’s grip was firm and friendly. And warm. “I’m Satan.”

The words were just barely missed by the Chuck E. Cheese waitress who approached, apron tight around her waist and overflowing with pre-packed bendy straws. She had clearly started the day with an attempt at a proper hairstyle, which was promptly suffocated by the mouse ears held on to her head by a thin elastic band. “Hi, my name’s—”

“Amy!” The devil said, grinning. She glanced down at her chest, where her nametag was missing off her uniform. “How’s the sister?”

Amy, to her credit, maintained a smile. “I...she’s fine, I don’t...how did you...”

The devil patted her hand. “It’s okay. She was in a dark place.” He frowned, eyes glancing up in a moment of pensive reflection. “I mean, she is in a much darker place now, but she was also in a dark place before.”

There was silence at our table interrupted by the wails of the child stuck in the arcade basketball hoop, being pounded senseless by his friends’ three-point shots. The faint smell of brimstone radiated off the devil, mixing with the aroma of marinara and body odor.

“I...” Amy said, eyes flickering between the two of us. Behind her, a small group of six-year-olds with birthday hats sprinted by.

“You should go check your phone,” the devil said. “But, when you get back, I would like a whiskey on the rocks, and Mr. Greg here, he will have...”

“Water,” I said. I glanced down at the page of rules I’d copied off the summoner’s website. Six was *avoid allowing the summoned too much control—they will test their boundaries.*

“Boooo,” the devil said. “Get him a whiskey too.”

“No, really, I want wat—”

“Sir...we...we don’t have whiskey, this is a family establishment...also, sir, this place is non-smoking, and...”

"Amy," the devil said, grinning at her. "Your sister just killed herself, about two hours ago. I'm not trying to play hardball here, but, you know, it'd be kind of a bummer if I had to snip-snap a few more branches off the Peterson family tree just to get a damn drink. So, let's get those whiskeys from the flask the cook keeps in his gym bag next to the Glock. In the meantime, I'm going to keep smoking, because giving these little shits cancer is about the best thing they can expect from this restaurant, and we will decide on what pizza we want by the time you get back. I'm thinking four cheese, Greg's thinking pepperoni, who knows what we'll decide. Half and half? Maybe just two pizzas? World's full of surprises.."

Amy Peterson, eyes wide and wet, face scrunched in a teeth-chattering smile, walked away for a few steps, then sprinted towards the kitchen doors, completely ignoring a middle-aged woman asking for more ranch dressing. She pulled her phone out as the doors swung shut.

"Talk about bad service," the devil chuckled. "Anyways, we should probably get somebody else to put our pizza order in for us, because I think our friend Amy's going to be a little out of commission." He glanced around the restaurant. "She is having a rough week. Rough like, r-u-f-f, you know, because her dog just died. And she's gonna O.D. on Friday." The devil stuck his tongue out and let his head fall to the side, limp. "Bummer, right? So leave a good tip. In cash. Not like you can pay for heroin with a Mastercard. But hey, what kind of pizza, that's the immediate concern. Then we'll talk shop."

*Rule number nine: avoid food or drink offered by the supernatural. Avoid accumulating debts in any way.* "I'm not hungry," I said. "I, uh..."

The devil sighed. "No fun, Greg. No fun. You know what all work and no fun leads to?"

"...hell?"

"Ulcers. And *then* hell!" the devil said. A passing child, bowl cut hanging low over his face, stopped and turned, mouth agape.

"You can't say that!" the kid said, his bowl cut trembling with moral righteousness.

"You should go ba—" I said quickly, reaching for the kid's hand. The devil raised his own hand—manicured, moisturized, and devoid of wrinkles or fingerprints. My mouth went dry, something in my throat seizing and clenching tight enough to rip.

"George," the devil said, giving the kid a big ol' grin. "You know your daddy?"

George nodded his head, confused.

The devil cocked an eyebrow, leaning in close. "Are ya sure?"

George stared for a minute, then looked at me. He opened his mouth to

speak and backpedaled, tripping over a chair. He scrambled up and ran away.

"The best part," the devil said. "He's actually his father's kid. But after that question at dinner tonight, it's probably the last straw on the divorce camel. I mean, good news, he gets to come back to all of this—" he gestured at the chaos around him "—every other weekend for the next twelve years." He paused. "Anyways, Greg, let's talk business."

Amy, makeup carved in streaks down her face, walked up, placing two plastic sippy cups reeking of alcohol down at our table. Her mouse ears were askew. She reached for the order pad in her apron and fumbled for a pen, not looking away from the dark suited man across from me.

"Here honey, borrow this one." The devil pulled out a fountain pen, unscrewed it, and handed it to her. She muttered a quiet, "Thank you," and went to write. The smell of iron and salt joined the smell of whiskey.

"Oh, shit, that's the blood pen," the devil said, snatching it back. Blood splattered across the table for the third time that day. "You know what, just give me the pad, Greg's being kind of a wet blanket about the pizza." He took the pad from Amy and slipped a roll of hundred-dollar bills into her apron. "Go cheer yourself up. Sorry about the sister." He turned away and back to me, doodling idly on the margins of the pad to get the ink running. Once it touched the page, it bled through, and ran down all the way to the bottom.

"Looks like we're in business!" The devil said, looking up at me. He snapped his fingers and both of our whiskeys burst up in flames for a moment. I pressed back into the seat, the heat clawing its way into my skin. "Oh, don't tell me you can't stand the heat. Because, Greg," he said, swinging his feet under the table, and leaning in close, a shark's smile stretching wide across his face, "I think we've got debts to talk about. The kind rule number thirteen can't help you with. Sure, you did rule number ten well—*do the summoning in a place that minimizes the creature's potential*—I mean, kids can't enter into legally binding contracts, so good call there. I'm like Elton John in a convent levels of not being able to fuck anyone over here. But rule number thirteen, Greg, that's the name of the game. Tell me what it is."

He didn't look away, his brown eyes dark and deep. I glanced down, looking at the grime on the table, the paper in my lap, at anything. Where he stared, I felt my skin itch and crawl, like it was trying to get away, to pull itself apart. *Rule number thirteen, rule number thirteen...*

"You don't remember it," he said, barely whispering over the arcade noises around us. "Go ahead and check. Some things you want to be real sure about. This is one of them."

I uncrumpled the paper and let my eyes fall down to the very bottom.

Rule number thirteen.

He nodded, barely moving, smile never stopping, and I felt my throat unclench.

“Don’t get in over your head,” I said, quietly.

The devil grinned wide and slid over the legal pad. With a lazy flick of a finger, he rolled the pen over to me, ink dripping all the way. •